

Involving Print and Electronic Media

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OBJECTIVES

Participating in mock election media efforts will help students:

1. analyze the responsibility of the press in informing and representing the interests of the citizenship in common policy issues.¹
2. discover what makes events newsworthy, the components of news stories, and how to get media coverage.
3. develop critical-thinking skills.
4. develop creative problem-solving skills.
5. hone research, organizational, and planning skills.
6. hone and develop writing skills.

METHODS

Following these steps will help you publicize your mock election events:

1. Develop a list of members of the media who may be interested in the mock election.
2. Invite members of the local media not only to cover your event, but to sponsor your event or serve as your partner.
3. Draft and send out press releases and/or media kits.
4. Follow up with phone calls to ensure your information has arrived and been forwarded to the right person.
5. Conduct editorial briefings for more elaborate events.
6. Consider other ways the media can help publicize your event.
7. Keep track of any coverage your event receives.

1. Before students can fully understand the “interest of the citizenship,” they must have a working knowledge of the meaning of citizenship in the United States, and the rights and responsibilities of citizens. See the new National Standards for Civics and Government, Section V. Students should also understand the fundamental issues of Constitutional democracy to ensure their future protection as well as to recognize threats to the well-being of the citizenship. See the new standards, Section II.

1. Develop a list of members of the media who may be interested in the mock election.

With the help of your students (or as part of a student homework assignment), develop a list of all the media in your area, including newspapers, TV and radio stations, magazines, and educational publications.

Learn the name of a specific contact for each source. For example, when contacting the print media, ask for the Newspaper in Education Coordinator or the publisher if seeking sponsorship of your event; ask for the education or news editor if you're seeking coverage. When contacting TV and radio stations, ask for the station manager if you're seeking sponsorship, and the news director or assignment editor if you're seeking coverage. Be sure to contact parents as well as the public relations office in your school or your school district (or perhaps the PR office of a local college or university) for agency contacts, press lists, and introductions. Other nonprofit agencies might have press lists or contacts they may be willing to share as well.

Other helpful resources include *Editor and Publisher*, *Bacon's Guides to TV and Newspapers*, your Yellow Pages, local college or university journalism professors and students, and library listings. You may also wish to visit local TV and radio stations and newspapers in person.

When developing your media list, be strategic and target two or three media sources that would be "big wins," then proceed to smaller venues. Don't forget the weeklies. Weekly newspapers, including shopper's guides, offer stories of interest to the local community. They are a major source of information for people outside metropolitan areas and it is usually easier to place stories in these publications.

2. Invite members of the local media not only to cover your event, but to sponsor your event or serve as your partner.

Don't wait until everything is in place. Involve all media in the early stages of planning. As mentioned in Method 1, you may want to contact the Newspapers in Education Coordinator at your local newspapers. NIE Coordinators have helped past mock election efforts in many ways, such as providing promotional and curriculum materials; co-coordinating and sponsoring districtwide or citywide projects and events; marketing the program to schools, educators, public officials, and the public; and hosting workshops. In some states a larger newspaper or the Newspaper in Education Coordinator sponsors projects statewide. Call your NIE Coordinator and/or publisher to explore possible sponsorship or to get help promoting your mock election events. (It is important to note that your NIE Coordinator works in the marketing department of the newspaper, and not the editorial department.)

In addition to sponsoring or providing your event with coverage, the media can get involved in many other ways. Media members could sponsor a series of career education speeches or orientations. They could also provide classroom or school speakers to explain how television determines election winners, how newscasters and journalists prepare for interviews and cover campaigns, or how computers are used in today's elections. In preparation for developing their own media skills, students could observe newscasters interviewing candidates. You could also ask the media to encourage local citizenship education and mock election activities by holding station fairs and/or conducting polls.

3. Draft and send out press releases and/or media kits.

Assign students the task of drafting press releases for upcoming mock election activities. Explain that the purpose of a press release is to convince a news organization that your event is worth covering. Suggest or have them develop their own unique “angles” or “hooks” to introduce their press releases. Suggest that students include facts to entice the press to their event, such as special guests (e.g., state or local candidates) who might be attending the event. If students have difficulty preparing their releases, have them ask themselves, “What makes this event interesting? Why/how is this event different from other events? How does it tie in with current trends? How does this project enhance the community?”

Review the elements of a good press release:

- ★ **the lead**—the who, what, when and where of a story
- ★ **the tie-in**—background information that explains the why and how
- ★ **the body**—additional details about an event in descending order of their importance so an editor can cut the story from the bottom without losing vital information

Also review the standard format of a press release:

- ★ Use standard letter-sized paper.
- ★ Double-space the text.
- ★ Begin the headline one-fourth of the way down the page. Use all caps. Make sure the headline is no longer than two lines long.
- ★ Begin the text one-half of the way down the page. (This gives the editor room to rewrite the headline or give instructions).
- ★ Leave 1 1/4-inch margins on the left and right hand side of every page and 1 1/2-inch margins on the top of every page except the first (to give the editor room to write comments).

- ★ Type “-MORE-” at the bottom of each page of continuing text and “-30-,” “##,” or “-END-” at the end of the release. (Note: press releases generally do not exceed two pages.)
- ★ Number each page in the upper left-hand corner.
- ★ Include a name and number to contact for more information at the top of the first page.

Once students’ drafts are complete, help them analyze each other’s work—will a news editor find this story compelling? Why or why not? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this piece? What are the main messages you get from this press release? (See *Figure A* for an example of an effective press release.)

Along with your press release, you may also wish to include photos that help tell the story of your event. Busy editors may skim text but a photo can tell your entire story in one glance. Black-and-white glossy photos are best for print media, color for TV media. Try to include action shots that convey energy and enthusiasm, such as students campaigning, interviewing candidates, or conducting get-out-the-vote activities. Perhaps student photographers would include their own work. (Note: Send copies of photos, as any photos you send will probably not be returned to you.)

Before submitting the materials to the media, make sure students have proofread the press release and checked it for accuracy (facts, punctuation, spelling). Mail your class’s release about 10 days prior to the event and allow one or two extra days for late mail delivery. For monthly magazines, materials should be sent in three months ahead of the issue date and three to four weeks ahead of the event date for community bulletin boards. Deadlines for TV and radio stations vary, so call your local TV and radio stations for further information.

Baltimore City Public Schools
200 East North Avenue,
Baltimore, Maryland 21202

Office of Public Relations
Contact: Marcy Crump
(410) 396-8577

For Immediate Release
October 7, 2000

**ASSOCIATED STUDENT CONGRESS OF BALTIMORE CITY ANNOUNCES
PRESIDENTIAL MOCK ELECTION PROJECT 2000**

The Associated Student Congress of Baltimore City (ASCBC), in cooperation with the Maryland Association of Student Councils (MASC), will hold a press conference on Tuesday, October 13, 2000, to announce the statewide Presidential Mock Election Project. The press conference will be held at 10:30 a.m. at the Westside Skill Center Tea Room located at 4501 Edmondson Avenue in Baltimore.

During the press conference Dr. Walter G. Amprey, Superintendent of Baltimore City Public Schools and Dr. Nancy Grasmick, Superintendent of the Maryland State Department of Education, will announce student participation in the 2000 Presidential Mock Election Project. Students from Baltimore City will cast mock ballots for President of the United States on Thursday, November 2, 2000, at Edmonson Senior High School in Baltimore.

The purpose of the mock election project is to teach high school students to become involved in the election process. Additionally, students are encouraged to study campaign issues and to become active, productive citizens.

For additional information, please contact Terrence Suber, ASCBC, 555-8888, or Marcy Crump, Office of Public Relations, 396-8577.

—END—

To make your presentation more eye-catching and informative, you may wish to have students assemble a “Media Information Packet” that includes a press release, background information, the introductory National Student/Parent Mock Election media letter (see Figure B) and fact sheet (see Figure C), and support letters to members of the media. Local media representatives may be willing to send you examples of briefing packets they have received in the past.

Please note: It is critical that the media understand the objectives of the National Student/Parent Mock Election and not mistake it for a prediction of the potential outcome of the real election. We urge you to send the introductory letter and fact sheet along with your press release or story. (The introductory letter below can be copied onto your school’s letterhead if you wish.)



Dear Journalist,

“Enlighten the people generally,” Thomas Jefferson wrote, “and tyranny and oppression ... will vanish.”

Educators and a free press share a common objective; both must work to protect the oncoming future.

We ask your help in protecting the educational value and integrity of the National Student/Parent Mock Election. Please do not present this role play in participatory democracy as a valid poll. The attached media fact sheet will help you understand why it is not designed as a poll, and cannot be misused as one without doing harm to its real value.

We are deeply grateful for your help.

Sincerely,

The National Student/Parent Mock Election

Figure B



MEDIA FACT SHEET

THE NATIONAL STUDENT/PARENT MOCK ELECTION

The National Citizenship Education Project

The purpose of the National Student/Parent Mock Election is to turn the sense of the powerlessness that keeps young people, and their parents, too, from going to the polls, into a sense of the power of participation. It is feelings of powerlessness, psychologists point out, that are the root cause of violence. The Center for Action Research (University of Colorado) found the National Student/Parent Mock Election REDUCED feelings of powerlessness. The project uses the motivation of the elections to teach the rule of law instead of the rule of gangs. We seek to help young Americans learn how, in a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people," they can affect change with votes instead of violence, ballots instead of bullets. We hope to help today's violence-prone generation learn it does not need a gun to be heard.

The National Student/Parent Mock Election is a citizenship education project that invites every American Student, from kindergarten through college level, parents, and grandparents, too, to participate. It seeks to help all generations become excited, involved, and comfortable with the electoral process.

It is not, and cannot by any stretch of the imagination be considered to be, a scientific sampling. The results cannot be used as the basis for an accurate prediction of the election. There is no uniformity of participation, of age levels, of preparation of voters, or of voting strategies.

In some locations parents vote, in others they do not. In some, student voters must register first, in others, they need not. In some, students vote their own choices, in others, their predictions of who the winners will be.

It is not an exit poll.

Much of the confusion about the influence of polls arises from a misunderstanding of the difference between exit polls, samplings taken after voters have left the polling booth, and polls taken prior to the national election. Pre-election polls, history has proven over and over again, have no effect whatsoever on elections. If they did, Tom Dewey would have been President! (The scientific and academic research to back this statement is available upon request.) Even if it permitted a scientific sampling, which it does not, the National Student/Parent Mock Election could not influence any election.

The National Student/Parent Mock Election asks the help of the media in using "The Election as Civics Lesson." It asks the help of the media in passing on the legacy of our democracy to America's future voters. It asks the media's help in providing

motivation and recognition for young students and their parents, today's and tomorrow's voters. The late Dr. Ralph W. Tyler, director emeritus, Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, stated, "Among the basic principles of learning are motivation and reward. Young people gain much greater interest and motivation in activities that get wide recognition. To see that their activities are recognized by the national news media is... exciting and stimulating."

The National Student/Parent Mock Election is totally nonpartisan. It has had the endorsement of both major national parties. Note that Frank J. Fahrenkopf, Jr., as chairman of the Republican National Committee, called the National Student/Parent Mock Election "undoubtedly the most innovative and successful enterprise in history for involving our young people in the American political process." TIME Magazine called it "the largest voter education project ever." Senator Orrin Hatch called it "not only the largest voter education project ever, but also the largest violence prevention project ever." Senator Ted Kennedy has said, "It will help us build a stronger nation for the future — and it will be an experience that none of the participants will ever forget."

The National Student/Parent Mock Election has been funded until 2004-05 by the United States Congress. Both Democratic and Republican governors and/or their spouses have served as honorary chairs or co-chairs of their state's Mock Election projects. The Council of Chief State School Officers has officially endorsed the project several times, as has the American Association of School Administrators, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, etc.

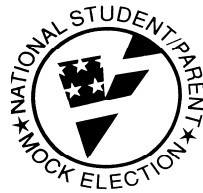
We ask the help of members of the media, and of the educational community, in properly presenting this citizenship education project to the public and carefully avoiding any possibility of misrepresenting it as a prediction. The world's longest lasting democracy, and "last best hope," is at stake. As the statistics on voter turnout show us, the risk is great, the dangers of civic illiteracy real.

The President, Senators, Congressmen, legislators and voters of tomorrow are all to be found in the classrooms of today.

Won't you help us pass the torch to an educated and informed generation, one responsible for leading our nation in the 21st century?

Finally, be sure to contact the news wire services, specifically the Associated Press (AP) and United Press International (UPI). Stories on the “wires” will go directly into every important newsroom in your area and can help increase your chances of placement. Send an advisory (see Figure D) to the AP Calendar at the AP and/or the UPI Advisor at UPI. (See the Resources section in the back of this guide for addresses).

While your students are creating their press releases and media kits, you may wish to intertwine lessons about the responsibility of the press to cover issues and events that may not be exciting or captivating to the public. Explore why this is important. Other relevant lessons might include an analysis of the kinds of stories that make the news every day, or instructions for locating and researching samples of successful press releases and stories.



To: UPI Daybook (or AP calendar)

(Address)

From: The League of Women Voters

June 9–15

The League of Women Voters in conjunction with the National Student/Parent Mock Election will sponsor a “get-out-the-vote” campaign the week of June 9–15. The campaign will kick off at Oak Grove Park on Sunday, June 9, with speeches by local candidates from 1–3 P.M. followed by refreshments and live music from 3–6 P.M. Voter registration booths will be open all day. Interested volunteers should contact Jane Leavey at 246/555-3274.

Figure D

4. Follow up with phone calls to ensure that your information has arrived and been forwarded to the right person.

The media will not come looking for you unless you find them and tell them your story. After your information is mailed, have students follow up with their media contacts to make sure a) that the releases were received and b) that reporters can attend the event. When speaking with a reporter, be succinct and make your event sound important. If a reporter cannot attend the event, suggest that students ask him or her for the name and number of a reporter who might be able to attend, and then have students follow up with their new contacts.

5. Conduct editorial briefings for more elaborate events.

Another way to inform the media about citywide or districtwide mock election events is to conduct—or arrange for students to conduct—a series of editorial briefings.

Editorial briefings inform media representatives about an event or organization, usually take place at the editor's office, and in this case, can help deepen media understanding of and interest in the mock election.

To organize an editorial briefing, call your media contacts and ask to set up a briefing at their convenience. With your students, prepare a presentation that tells reporters about the mock election, its objectives and purposes, its relevance to the community and importance to students, and what has been done locally in past years. Follow up your meeting with written information about the mock election that can be referenced by reporters for accuracy or to brief other reporters.

6. Consider other ways the media can help you get the word out.

In addition to writing or reporting the details of your event, the media can help get the word out in other ways, such as:

- ★ public-service announcements (PSAs).
- ★ community calendars.
- ★ TV and radio station editorials.

A. PUBLIC-SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENTS

All TV and radio stations are required by law to provide free air time to public service organizations. You might consider developing a PSA to help get the word out about your mock election event. Contact the public-service or station manager at your local TV or radio station (also try local public access stations) and request a meeting to determine what the station's PSA specifications are and if they can help you produce your spot. When developing a PSA, you probably want to develop a 10-second spot (approximately 25 words), a 30-second spot (approximately 75 words), or a 60-second spot (approximately 150 words). The editor at the station may also be able to help you edit your PSA into all three of those formats. Also keep the following guidelines in mind:

- ★ Use short, upbeat sentences and talk in a conversational tone.
- ★ Explain how your information can help your listener/viewer.
- ★ Ask for action on the audience's behalf.
- ★ Tell your audience exactly what to do or where to go.
- ★ Instruct your audience to contact your program for more information (and include your name and phone number).

B. COMMUNITY CALENDARS

Community calendars are brief announcements for community members. Include mock election activities in these types or programs—many public officials listen to these programs to help keep them abreast of what is happening locally. Draft an announcement with the name of the project; the date, time, and location of the event; a brief statement of purpose; and the name and phone number of someone to contact for more information. This announcement should be typed, double-spaced, on standard letter size paper, with one announcement per page. Mail the notice well in advance of the event (three to four weeks) to the public relations director at the TV/radio station or the news editor at your newspaper.

C. TV AND RADIO STATION EDITORIALS

Station editorials are public discussions of the manager's or editor's views or opinions of a specific issue with a portion of the program allocated to opposing viewpoints. This is a great opportunity to air student debates about the issues or student interviews of opposing candidates. Make sure you are familiar with the station's editorials and understand its objectives and who its target audiences are before you commit to hosting, or having students develop, a segment of the program. To get a list of programs, call the stations and request a viewing schedule or copies of previous programs.

If you decide to participate in a public program, brainstorm and outline ideas with your students before calling the station manager or news editor. Explain how your project will benefit the community, and remember that listeners want entertainment, not just information, and that your visuals need to be colorful and compelling! (See Chapter 6: Organizing Local Cable Call-In Shows.)

7. Keep track of any coverage your event receives.

One week following the event, have students send press members who attended the event a packet of information that contains a thank-you letter, a list of several teachers, administrators and/or students who can speak about the mock election, and additional information for potential follow-up articles. (Giving each media outlet the same people to contact can help avoid confusion and misinformation.) If reporters do not cover the event or publish your story, don't complain—it's a sure way not to get future coverage. Be sure to help students understand why the story may not have been placed, what they can do better next time, and brainstorm other ways of attracting the press.

Remember that you will have some strikeouts. Try not to get frustrated. You are bound to hit some home runs, and that can be fun and rewarding.